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[Home](#) [Blogs](#) [ProfHacker](#)



[Previous](#)
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into a DH Gathering...

[Next](#)
Sabbatical Diary: What They
Are and How to Apply for
One →

Using Open Space Technology to Organize Meetings and Unconferences

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By [Prof. Hacker](#)



[This is a guest post by Jon Voss, the [Historypin](#) Strategic Partnerships Director at [We Are What We Do](#). He most recently organized the [International Linked Open Data in Libraries, Archives, and Museums Summit](#), an Open Space-run meeting funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, hosted by the Internet Archive in San Francisco. Follow him on Twitter at [@jonvoss](#).--@jbj]

I'm not much of a conference person, I have to admit. I have a hard time sitting still listening to more than a couple of presentations, and often find myself bouncing from room to room, usually spending more time in the hallways and bar than anywhere else. So you can imagine that attending my first unconference seven years ago was both a revelation, and a deep relief.

Unconferences are gatherings of people that are organized around a theme or idea or question, but that have no set agenda before the meeting. The agenda is created on the morning of the event by the participants themselves. While more common perhaps in the technology and creative sectors, they are becoming more and more common in academic settings.

Since then I've attended many and even [organized](#) a few, all with varying degrees of success and enjoyment. Over the years, I've realized that the ones I've attended or convened that I've enjoyed the most, gotten the most out of, or that have accomplished the most, all have several elements in common.

First of all, there's *a method to the madness of an unconference*. Open Space Technology is an actual organizing principle that's been in use for more than twenty years. Harrison Owen has written a [book about the technique](#) he created and much of the essentials can be found [online](#) as well.

Passion and Responsibility. The success of your event hinges on these two things. Your participants must have passion for the topic at hand and responsibility to make things happen. As an organizer, ensuring this is your number one priority.

Inspire. To me, all elements of unconferences or meetings that I've convened must be inspiring. This includes the people attending, the place where we come together, the food that we eat while we're there, and everything in between. This sometimes requires getting creative of course. At my last meeting, which included 100 people and was held at a nice hotel, I chose to book several local restaurants for lunch ahead of time rather than keep people penned up in the hotel and serve catering. The local restaurateurs were happy for the business, prepared amazing food, and cost much less than the hotel.

All or Nothing. It's sometimes hard to believe that people will self-organize for hours or days in order to achieve a common goal, but they will. As organizers, we sometimes think that it might just be too much of a stretch, that we should make it easier by facilitating the process in one way or another, or that we can tack on some open sessions into a multi-day conference. My experience has been that these meetings often come up short. If we give people the space and the time with the right tools, they'll make something amazing out of it—and it will most often be nothing like we could have imagined.

The Circle is Important. I woke up in a sweat the morning before the first unconference I'd organized because I had dreamed someone had put all of our chairs back around tables in a classroom-like setup. What people experience in the first 30 minutes of an unconference will set the tone for the rest of their time together. Seeing themselves as peers and knowing they are responsible for their own time there, within the space of a circle, is absolutely key. I've found that gathering again in the circle at the end, and giving everyone a chance to say a few words, brings powerful closure to the event.

Make creative space. As someone who doesn't do well at conferences, I'm very conscious to set the tone of gatherings I organize in a way that welcomes creative space. Having a diverse number of breakout rooms, indoor and outdoor gathering places, colorful markers and

paper are all ways to help encourage that. While it's empty when the meeting starts, it will be transformed into something owned by the group in short order—and that transformation may be a measure of your success.

Have you organized meetings with Open Space technology? What worked (or didn't)? Let us know in comments!

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jjulius 2 weeks ago

I've participated in and helped run unconferencing sessions as the last half-day of a multi-day conference or faculty institute. This has been a great way for people to follow up and go deeper on shared interests that have been informed/inflamed by something that has come up earlier in the week. I agree that this may not be the ideal use of Open Space technology, but as a way to give it a try and expose more people to the concept, I don't think it has to be all or nothing. It seemed to give a big energy boost to participants at that time of a conference that usually sees a gradual dwindling away of participants and enthusiasm.

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collegeeducator 1 week ago [in reply to jjulius](#)

Thanks for the example of using the approach to end. Traditional conference. I agree with observation how often participants need a different experience at the end to transition and take action.

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